

# Health Policy

## NEWSLETTER

### Family Preparedness: An Important Step in Emergency Management

Since the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 and Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the federal government has increasingly promoted disaster preparedness to ensure its agencies, state and local healthcare organizations, and American families are prepared to respond to emergency situations. Recent pandemics like swine flu (H1N1) further emphasize why hospitals need to be prepared for a sudden influx of patients.

The Joint Commission requires hospitals to develop and follow emergency management standards. This has prompted the Emergency Management Committee at Thomas Jefferson University Hospitals (TJUH) to reexamine the hospitals' policies and procedures related to emergency operations and discuss ways to improve emergency responses and communications. This Committee's efforts also include educating physicians and staff about the importance of family preparedness.

At hospitals like TJUH, when an external disaster occurs, designated physicians and other employees are summoned to work, and often will need to report during non-business hours to provide additional services during a major disaster. If employees fear leaving their families and pets to fend for themselves, the hospital's ability to implement its emergency operations plan may be compromised. Furthermore, the delivery of continuous and effective patient care could be disrupted.

Family preparedness is a strategy that assists individuals, families, and communities in avoiding or reducing the negative impact of a natural or man-made disaster through the development and implementation of a specific plan. The US Department of Homeland Security has recognized

that a lack of family preparedness has prevented physicians and hospital employees from reporting to work during disasters. Because of this finding some health care organizations, such as the Kaiser Permanente health care system in California, have implemented family disaster preparedness trainings for staff. More in-depth studies are needed to determine the impact of these family preparedness training programs on staff response.

One of the most comprehensive training programs is the government-sponsored *Ready* campaign, initiated by the Department of Homeland Security in 2003 to "educate and empower Americans to prepare for and respond to emergencies, including natural disasters and potential terrorist attacks."<sup>1</sup>

The *Ready* campaign encourages people to follow three basic steps in order to be prepared to respond to emergencies: *Get a Kit*, *Make a Plan*, *Be Informed*.

The *Get a Kit* step encourages families to use supplies they have to "make it on their own" for at least three days during a disaster. Recommended supplies include: one gallon of water per person per day, a three-day supply of non-perishable food, a battery-powered radio and flashlight (and extra batteries), first aid kit, whistle, one filter mask (or cotton t-shirt) per person, moist towelettes, wrench or pliers, manual can opener, plastic sheeting, duct tape, garbage bags and ties as well as any *unique* family needs, such as prescription medications or important documents.<sup>2</sup>

The *Make a Plan* step guides families in developing a specific plan to prepare for a future emergency. Each family should create a communications plan, including important contact information, a plan for creating a

shelter as protection from contaminated air and/or flying debris, and a plan to leave the disaster area using multiple routes and various types of transportation.<sup>2</sup>

The *Be Informed* step encourages people to become aware of potential threats in their state and local community. Responses to natural disasters and terrorist threats can be extremely different, meaning it is important for families to be aware of their areas' vulnerabilities and able to adapt to various situations. The *Ready* campaign website<sup>1</sup> offers a wealth of information, including responses to different types of threats, and emergency planning templates, tools and tips for creating emergency supply kits.

It is important to mention that September is the sixth annual National Preparedness Month (NPM 2009). This particular campaign will focus on changing perceptions of emergency preparedness in an effort to help people understand that preparedness goes beyond standard security measures; it also involves communication and education of families, communities, and businesses.<sup>3</sup> NPM Coalition membership is open to all public and private sector organizations in the hope that they will share preparedness information with their customers, employees, and communities.

TJUH's Emergency Management Committee encourages all citizens, especially physicians and other health care employees, to explore resources such as *Get a Kit*, *Make a Plan* and *Be Informed* so that they may feel more confident about their ability to respond appropriately to a disaster situation. ■

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